

In 2021, the Suter Gallery (Nelson) mounted a group show of Aotearoa artists whose work embraces absurdity. One of Bryce Galloway's offerings to the show was the catalogue essay, reworked and re-presented here. The essay investigates whether the well-worn proposition that absurd art finds greater currency in times of socio-political duress still holds in the face of today's accelerating online narratives and divergent internet realities.

On Tristan Tzara and Steve Bannon

BRYCE GALLOWAY

Pepe the Frog was once a free-wheeling slacker, the comic book invention of artist Matt Furie, only to be ripped from the artist's Myspace page to become a meme for anonymous 4Chan incels dwelling in their mom's basements.¹ Pepe went from happy frog to sad frog to a frog that screamed 'fuck normies' in response to cooption by well-adjusted straights (following Pepe retweets by Nicki Minaj and Katy Perry). In an attempt to stymie this ongoing normie cooption, incels made their screaming frog darker still: smug Pepe the Nazi, smug Pepe the ISIS terrorist, ultimately threatening to unleash a real-world Beta uprising. The incels backed Trump, who returned the favour by retweeting their Trump Pepe and striking the 'smug Pepe' pose during a press-conference. Pepe the frog then morphed into the Egyptian frog-god Kek, inspiring the creation of the nation of Kekistan, whose 'citizens' waved the Kekistan flag while ransacking the US Capitol (with tasteless irony, the fictitious nation's 'citizens' describe themselves as a 'disparate and dispossessed people').²

Er, that's pretty absurd stuff, and the briefest synopsis I

1 Thanks to Suter Art Gallery curator Sarah McClintock for the initial invitation to write about absurdity in art; thanks to Dr Martin Patrick and *Counterfutures* editor Jack Foster for proofing and suggestions.

2 See: <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/kekistan>

can offer of the Pepe the Frog documentary *Feels Good Man* (Arthur Jones, Wavelength Films/Ready Fictions, 2020). It has little to do with absurdity in art, the topic that kickstarted this essay when I was invited to write something for the catalogue of the 9th *Suter Contemporary Art Project*. The annual *Suter Contemporary* aims to pluck a theme from the zeitgeist and invite relevant Aotearoa artists to respond.

Initially, I was researching a contribution to the well-worn story of absurd art's enduring power to upset dominant narratives during troubled times. Dada artists came to see absurdity as a necessary antidote to the logic of European states engaged in the trench warfare of World War One. In July of 1916, Hugo Ball penned a Dada Manifesto that claimed 'Dada is the world soul, dada is the pawnshop. Dada is the world's best lily-milk soap'.³ Ball was hiding out in neutral Switzerland, just a few doors down from an exiled Vladimir Lenin working on *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, which also had something to say about the capitalist dichotomy of pawnshops and lily-milk soap. According to Google maps, it takes 59 seconds to walk from Lenin's former Zurich residence at Spiegelgasse 14 to Dada's Cabaret Voltaire at Spiegelgasse 1.

Just a few short years after Ball and Lenin's time on Spiegelgasse, Lenin was premier of the Soviet Union and Ball had rejected absurdity in favour of the law of Catholicism. Ugh! The rigor mortis of revolutionary ideas, on both counts. Ball's retreat from Dada allowed Tristan Tzara to rebrand and claim that he had been the founding Dada all along.⁴ The Dada celebration of chance as a fruitful art strategy fed into the Surrealists' psychoanalytical interest in expanding reality to embrace the workings of the unconscious.

Surrealism recently visited Te Papa for four-and-a-half months with *Surrealist Art: Masterpieces from Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen*. Perhaps you saw it, perhaps you booked in for a 'Surrealist Art High Tea' with your friends (\$29-\$49ea.) or bought a 'Surrealism pen' decorated with a plastic Dali moustache (\$4.90) or a bottle of 'Manifesto Parfum' (\$139).

3 Hugo Ball, *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Dairy*, ed. John Elderfield (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 221.

4 Elderfield, 'Introduction', in Ball, *Flight Out of Time*, xix-xliii.

What an unbearable snob I am! The exhibition was actually well worth a visit, and the aforementioned goodies are perhaps no more gauche than the commodity manoeuvres of Salvador Dali, who was nicknamed Avida Dollars by Surrealist overlord André Breton. Breton eventually expelled Dali from the Surrealists for alleged Nazi sympathies, though Dali was possibly just being his contrarian self, investing in Hitler as a fetish dream-archetype (the rest of the Surrealist canon were avowedly anarcho-communist).

The Fluxus art movement of the 1960s briefly went by the term ‘Neo Dada’. George Maciunas’s rather derivative Fluxus Manifesto of 1963 called for the promotion of ‘living art, anti-art [and] NON ART REALITY’. In his 1965 manifesto Maciunas’s nuanced his articulation of Fluxus toward a greater collapse of the boundaries between rarefied art and the everyday: ‘this substitute art-amusement must be simple, amusing, concerned with insignificances, obtainable by all and eventually produced by all’.⁵

Fluxus artists would write and perform intentionally simple event scores. Alison Knowles *Proposition #2: Make a Salad* performed in 1962 at London’s ICA saw the artist on stage. . . making a salad. Knowles made her salad in a large pickle barrel and then served it to the audience. The absurdity at play was not Surrealism’s meeting of unlikely objects, but a ubiquitous everyday activity meeting the expectations set up by a framing of this activity as art, or anti-art. Either way the word ‘art’ hovers about Knowles’s salad-making.

Dada, Surrealism, and Fluxus all employed absurdity as a circuit breaker to the hegemonic socio-political norms of their times, norms understood by these artists as dangerous and needing to be challenged by artful iconoclastic nonsense. It’s no coincidence that these art movements coincide with the horrors of World War One, World War Two, and the Vietnam War.

Though the avant-garde has always been, by definition, at odds with mainstream society, Dada and Surrealism happened within a modernist era that proffered patronising colonial narratives and universal values that were beginning to splinter during Fluxus-era civil-rights campaigns, second-

5 See: georgemaciunas.com

wave feminism, anti-war protests, and political protests against old-guard hierarchies (May '68 et al).

Of course, despite their best efforts, Dadaists and Surrealists were not immune to the assumptions of their time. The Surrealists may have shown an ability to extricate their minds from certain political, psychological, and aesthetic straightjackets, but discussions of gender and race largely remained one-sided and fetishistic. The Surrealist championing of Indigenous art now looks hopelessly patronising for its essentialist shortcuts. This is discussed in one of the more critical sections of the Te Papa show catalogue: 'bundl[ing] together many different complex systems of knowledge and belief, reducing these to a European fantasy about "other" ways of living. Although French Surrealists actively protested against twentieth-century colonialism, they also framed the African, American and Pacific artwork that they admired and collected entirely in relation to their own dreams and desires'. The catalogue also describes Surrealist artists licensing the exhibition of their own artworks alongside objects from their personal ethnographic collections.⁶

In the 21st century, relativist narratives multiply. Revisionism usefully dismembers a fixed historical target like Surrealism, though our smugness in effecting this is unbecoming. Mutable living targets are harder to pin down. Contemporary 'cancel culture' can sometimes look like revisionism on steroids, revising the hopelessly outdated attitudes of last decade, last year, last month with increasing velocity and internet speed. Most of us in high-tech democracies have the freedom to mount the soapbox of social media and share our perspectives with the World Wide Web (it's where we live). At face value, that sounds wonderfully democratic, but at some point this sea of opinions just becomes so much noise.

In *The Uprising*, Berardi describes 'semio-inflation' as 'when you need more signs, words and information to buy less meaning. It is a problem of acceleration. . . . Attention cannot be infinitely accelerated'.⁷ But

6 Elizabeth Bisley, Els Hoek, and Lizzie Bisley, *He Toi Pohewa/Surrealist Art: Masterpieces from Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen* (Wellington: Te Papa Press, 2021), 23.

7 Franco Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012).

you can exploit the online chaos. In 2018, Steve Bannon, the former head of *Breitbart News* and chief strategist for Donald Trump said, ‘The Democrats don’t matter. The real opposition is the media. And the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit’.⁸ Donald Trump as the master absurdist. But absurdity without humour? OK, clearly many people think the guy’s funny; I guess I’m buying into the school of comedy that suggests you don’t ‘punch down’ on ‘unattractive women’, disabled people, ‘bad hombres’ . . .

The societal rigidity that made a Dada collage an aesthetic and narrative affront is now washed away in a sea of samples and resamples, deep-fried memes, PR, spin, irony, gaslighting, conspiracies, tribalism, alternative facts, generation wars, built-in obsolescence, cancel culture, identity politics, personality politics, hacks, apologies, rebirths, reinventions, makeovers and makeup tutorials. It’s, er. . . a lot. Structurally the Dada collage *is* the original meme, co-opting the visual property of others to its own ends, its own chaos. But the Dada collage is fanciful, it doesn’t become a Frankenstein dogma like the nation of Kekistan.

Does absurdity as an aesthetic strategy have the power to upset the dominant narrative when that narrative has become so fractured and deterritorialised? Does absurdity have the power to upset when narrative itself has become absurd? ‘Our attention is under permanent demand, but is unable to focus on a particular object’, warns Berardi, discussing the electrostimulation of our every waking hour.⁹ Beyond the multitude of voices begging our attention, there is also the narrative absurdity of surfing the web (surely surfing is the wrong metaphor for such a spasmodic dance).

As a 55-year-old who carries a ‘burner-phone’ and practices limited social-media engagement, I decided I best put these questions to a bunch of smartphone-toting Gen Zers more attuned to online narrative habits. I asked 20 fine arts students in their late teens and early twenties if their

8 Sean Illing, “Flood the zone with shit”: How misinformation overwhelmed our democracy’, *Vox*, 6 February 2020.

9 Franco Berardi, *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility* (London: Verso, 2017), 53.

online narratives had become absurd, jumping from one partially digested story to another—surfing the net from tweet, to article intro, to status update. . .

Bless them, with heads cocked, the assembled students professed little idea as to what I was driving at. That's the thing about the generation-gap-dot-com, most youth don't possess pre-internet habits of narrative consumption as a point of comparison.

With these same students I'd shared the 2019 *Guardian* article by Rachel Aroesti—"Horribly absurd": how did millennial comedy get so surreal?"¹⁰ Aroesti's article zeros in on the incongruous narratives of *Adult Swim* TV shows. Rather than possessing any political dimension oriented toward upsetting dominant narratives, it seems *Adult Swim*'s absurdity is just there to make us feel normal in these crazy times. As Aroesti writes, 'According to Andrew DeYoung, director of 555 and one-time editor on The Eric Andre Show, the *Adult Swim* school of comedy is designed to "reflect the frenetic distribution of information on the internet – that's why a lot of their shows are so chaotic and absurd"'. And later in the same article: "A lot of comedy stuff that goes viral is very short and decontextualised – it's just a five-second clip of something very strange," explains Brett Mills, senior lecturer at UEA and author of *The Sitcom*. "It's that idea of narrative disappearing"¹¹.

Even these claims failed to rouse much by the way of identification from my students; mostly, they just protested that I had them reading about TV shows that were several years old. However, there was some musing as to the dark weirdness of shows that had passed as children's entertainment when they were younger.

Towards the end of *Feels Good Man* we see cartoonist Matt Furie presenting at a seminar, suffering Pepe the Frog's 4Chan takeover in his self-deprecating way: 'I've gotten trolled. Somebody sent me this [shows image].

10 The article title riffs on an alarmist 2017 story in the *Washington Post*: Elizabeth Bruenig, 'Why is millennial humor so weird?' *Washington Post*, 11 August 2017.

11 Rachel Aroesti, "Horribly absurd": how did millennial comedy get so surreal? *The Guardian*, 13 August 2019.

I don't take it personally, even though I'm having my head decapitated. It is what it is, right?'

This essay started as one to join the litany on 'absurdity as antidote in crazy times'. I'm afraid these crazy times well and truly derailed my initial proposition : (



Figure 1. A frame from the Matt Furie strip
Pepe the Frog: To Sleep, Perchance to Meme.

Printed with the following permission from the artist after asking
for a high-res file: 'please use lo res version for your essay,
Pepe is best when he looks like shit'.